

# The Argument that Altruism is Self-defeating

- First Argument for EE: The argument that altruism is self-defeating.
  - Each of us has privileged access to our own interests and **not** those of others. Therefore when we aim to help others with what we perceive as their interests we will often do more harm than good.
  - “Looking out for others” makes those others objects of charity and is an invasion of privacy.
  - Making others objects of charity robs them of their dignity and self-respect.

# Responses to the “Altruism is Self-defeating” Argument

- First, it seems clear that at least in some instances I know the interests of others and can act on them without significant risk of doing more harm than good.
  - Shipwreck case.
- Second, the bigger problem is that the argument relies on a hidden premise that is completely inconsistent with Ethical Egoism.
  - We can see this if we lay the argument out in a more formal way.

# Responses to the “Altruism is Self-defeating” Argument

1. We ought to do whatever will best promote everyone's interests.
  2. The best way to promote everyone's interests is for each of us to pursue our own interests exclusively.
  3. Therefore, each of us should pursue our own interests exclusively.
- Premise 1. is a altruistic premise, not an egoistic one, but it is necessary for the argument to succeed.

# The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- Some advocates of EE have argued that it supports common moral rules.
  - Don't lie. (people will distrust us, lie to us in return, this frustrates our interests)
  - Don't harm. (people harm us in return, this frustrates our interests)
  - Keep Promises. (Can't trust others to keep their promises, this frustrates our interests)

# The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- The reason in each case that the rules should be followed is that not doing so frustrates long-term interests.
- The first problem is that if these effects can be taken away, then lying, harming and breaking promises become not just permissible, but obligatory.
  - Hermit case.

# The Argument that EE is consistent with Commonsense Morality

- The second problem is that even if we accept the argument, it does not prove enough to establish EE as the correct moral theory.
- It may be true that your self-interest leans in the direction of not committing murder due to the long-term consequences, but this does not establish the fact that these are the only reasons not to commit murder.
- Instead, it seems perfectly consistent with these claims to say that murder is also (or actually) wrong *because it is the unjustified destruction of an autonomous moral being*.

# Three Arguments Against Ethical Egoism

1. EE endorses wickedness.
2. Kurt Baier's arguments that EE is logically inconsistent and/or can't handle conflicts of interest.
3. The charge of Arbitrariness.

We will take each argument in turn.

# 1. EE Endorses Wickedness

- True newspaper stories:
  1. A paramedic injects emergency patients with sterile water in order to sell the morphine.
  2. Parents feed their baby acid so they can fake a lawsuit about tainted formula.
  3. A nurse rapes two patients while they are unconscious.
  4. A man who was \$90,000 in debt shoots his mailman seven times because he prefers prison to homelessness.

Clearly, if they hadn't been found out, these actions would have been in each of the actor's interests. Should we really endorse them as moral????

## 2. Baier's Logical Inconsistency Argument.

- It is one of the strongest charges a philosopher can level against a theory is that it is logically inconsistent (self-contradictory in this case).
- Here's the setup (my version, not Baier's):
  - Al Franken and Norm Coleman are fighting a legal battle about who won the Minn. Senate seat. Let us presume that they are both ethical egoists and if one of them disappears the other will be declared winner.

## 2. Baier's Logical Inconsistency Argument.

1. It is in Al Franken's best interest (and therefore his moral obligation) to kidnap and Kill Norm Coleman.
2. It is in Norm Coleman's best interest (and therefore his moral obligation) to kidnap and kill Al Franken.
3. It is also in each of their interests (and therefore their moral obligation) to stop the other from kidnapping and killing them.
4. It is morally impermissible to stop someone from fulfilling their moral obligation.
5. It is therefore both morally obligatory for each of them to stop the other, and morally impermissible.

This means that a single act is both morally obligatory and impermissible. This is a clear contradiction.

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The ethical egoist has a response to this argument however.  
One of these premises is an assumption that Baier makes which an egoist might well deny.

Which is it???

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Should we accept this premise?

“The Fugitive” example.

## 2. Baier's Conflict of Interest Argument

- Question: Who gets the last piece of pizza?



- kid
- Or the hungry homeless veteran?

## 2. Baier's Conflict of Interest Argument

- According to Baier, EE doesn't give us a clear answer in cases where there is a conflict of interest such as this one.
- The Ethical Egoist could simply claim that it is obligatory for both the spoiled kid and the veteran to go for the pizza, and the one who gets it is the moral victor.
- But is "just fight it out" a moral theory?
- Shouldn't a moral theory at least give us a framework for evaluating which one deserves it more? This certainly seems preferable to "might makes right."

### 3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Principle of Equal Treatment:
  - We should treat people the same way unless there is a relevant difference between them. To do so is arbitrary discrimination.
- Clarification:
  - This does not mean insuring the same outcome for everyone! But giving everyone an equal opportunity for a particular outcome.
  - Vietnam Draft Example.

### 3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- There are lots of doctrines that violate this requirement against arbitrary discrimination.
  - Can you think of some examples?
    1. Racism
    2. Sexism
    3. Ageism
    4. Sizeism
    5. Nationalism?
  - These doctrines privilege a certain group for no relevant reason.

### 3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Egoism also privileges on particular set of persons over others, namely yourself over everyone else.
- The question is: Is Egoism one of the bad 'isms?
- If there is a good reason to discriminate against everyone else it is not a bad 'ism.
- If there is no good reason, it is as bad as racism or sexism, and to be dismissed as readily.

### 3. The Arbitrariness Argument

- Imagine yourself as a refugee in Darfur. You stumble upon a cache of food. Egoism says you should take it for yourself as food is scarce.
- Now we might ask, why shouldn't you share the food? Why do you privilege yourself over everyone else?
  - Does hunger affect others any less than you?
  - Are others less deserving?
  - Are you more intelligent?
  - Do you enjoy life more than everyone else?
  - In short, what makes you so special?
- Failing a satisfactory answer egoism is an unacceptably arbitrary doctrine and should be dismissed as a serious moral contender.